

A HISTORY OF ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

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Prof. Majid Fakhry is an Arab who has taught philosophy at the American University of Beirut and is presently teaching this subject at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. He writes in Arabic as well as in English and his works on Arabic thought, Aristotle, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Bajjah etc. have been widely acclaimed. In 1970, he published *A History of Islamic Philosophy* in New York. A second edition came out in 1983. This work traces the history of Islamic Philosophy and theology from the earliest times to the present day. The author sheds light on the profound Muslim culture and analyses the impact of varied currents of thought and philosophy upon it. The writer is justified in depending on the Arabic sources, though he has referred to sources in English, Persian and a few other Western languages as well. So well printed and costly a book is not free from typical errors and the author's own mistakes are also understandable. Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan was given the title of 'Khan Bahadur'. Prof. Majid Fakhry thinks of 'Bahadur' (pages 335, 347 etc.) to be a place in the Indian Sub-Continent. The subject-matter, is quite satisfying and has been arranged well. The author also places the views of others before us but he never fails to offer adequate criticism in each case. It is but natural that he should have attended mostly to the Arab philosophers. He acquaints us with the life, works and thought of a few contemporary Arab thinkers too, in the closing pages of this work. This useful introduction is devoted to Sayyid Qutb, Muhammad al-Bahi, Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, Shibli Shumayyil, Zaki Nagih Mahmud, Qasim Amin, Faroh Antun, Yaqub Surruf, Salmah Musa, Sadiq J-al-Azam, H. Muruwah and Laroui etc.

A History of Islamic Philosophy is a novel work if not quite original. The author writes in his preface:

.... there historical narratives ... appeared in very recent years, M. Cruz Hernandez, *Filosofia hispano-Muslimana* (1957), though primarily concerned with Spanish - Muslim Philosophy, Contains extensive and callable account of the major "Eastern" Philosophers and schools, W. Montgonery

Watt's Islamic Philosophy and Theology (1962), which is part of a series entitled "Islamic Surveys", is weighted in favour of theology and therefore does not add much to our knowledge of Islamic Philosophy, Henry Corbin's *Histoire de la Philosophie islamique* (1964), though very valuable, does not recognize the organic character of Islamic thought and tends to over-emphasize the Shiite and particularly Ismaili'-element in the history of this thought. M. M. Sharrif's *History of Muslim Philosophy* is a symposium by a score of writers and lacks for this reason the unity of conception and plan that should characterize a genuine historical survey (p. ix).

Author's introduction concludes with the following lines:

....Islamic philosophy can be said to have followed a distinctive line of development which gave it that unity of form which is a characteristic of the great intellectual movements in history. We should, however, guard against the illusion that the course of its development was perfectly straight. Some of the most fascinating Muslim thinkers, such as al-Nazzam (d. 845), al-Razi (d. 925) and al-Ma' arri (d. 105), fall outside the mainstream of thought in Islam. Their dissident voices lend a discordant note to an otherwise monotonous symphony. The difficulty of expounding their thought with any degree of completeness is bound up with its every nonconformist character. Islam did generate such dissentient and solitary souls, but it could not tolerate or accept them in the end. The historian of Islamic thought cannot overlook them, however, without distorting the total picture" (p. XXIV).

Even a layman will learn much about Islamic history, polity, philosophy, theology and mysticism or sufism etc. from this handy work entitled 'A History of Islamic Philosophy'.

Prof. Majid Fakhry has commented upon the views of the Muslim philosophers and has included Iqbal also in his purview. He may not have read the translations of Iqbal's works since he has not referred to any of the

translations of his poetic works, nor even to any anthology of Iqbal's English writings. The Development of Metaphysics in Persia has been enlisted in the reference works though any citation from it is not seen in the text. A few philosophical ideas of Iqbal have been seen only in the light of The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam though the author erroneously calls this book of seven chapters 'Six Lectures' (p. 350) the 1930 edition of the book in fact had six lectures only. The author is spellbound to realize the vastness and depth of Iqbal's thought (p. 354). The only criticism on Iqbal is that of liberalism ((p 354)), In Fakhry's view, like other liberals of the India sub-continent, Iqbal interprets the Holy Qur'an (koran) without reference to the historical circumstances in which the quoted verses were revealed. The author, however, forgets the fact that the Qur'an is an eternal and living book; a guide for all times. Hence, the meanings of its verses cannot remain bound in 'asbab-e-nuzul', alone and 'Allama Iqbal has referred to this point frequently, more particularly in his poetry.

Iqbal has been mentioned in part (ii) of the last (12th) chapter of the book. Apart from random references here and there in the course of the book he has been mentioned, more particularly at pages 349 to 355 which are being appended below, the main currents of Iqbal's thought, as these manifest in the Reconstruction³⁵³ have been highlighted. Hereunder is the extract:

The most significant, if not the only, attempt to interpret Islam in modern philosophical terms is that of another important Indian thinker, Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), a poet of profound sensibility and a scholar of vast philosophical culture. Rather than draw on history, in his attempt to restate the Islamic world-view in modern terms, as Ameer Ali had done, he draws upon the philosophical heritage of the West without reservation. His aim, it is true, is not to demonstrate the validity of the Western outlook, but rather its essential conformity with the koranic Weltanschauung. Thus the synthesis he attempts in his Reconstruction of Religious

³⁵³ Majid Fakhry has used the earlier unedited/annotated edition of the Reconstruction (see p. 373 of the book) which, in some cases, makes a considerable difference in the understanding of the text

Thought in Islam may be compared in its magnitude to the synthesis attempted .1 millennium earlier by al-Ghazali in his *Revival of the Religious Sciences* ('Al Ihya). In substance it is more analogous, however, to the syntheses attempted by al-Kindi and Ibn Rushd, who set out to harmonize the philosophical world view of the Greeks and the religious world-view of Islam. The fundamental difference between them is that, whereas the philosophical categories employed by al-Kindi and Ibn Rushd were drawn from Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, those employed by Iqbal are drawn from those of Hegel, Whitehead, and Bergson, The masters have changed, but the problem remains essentially the same, namely, the attempt to bridge the fulf between speculative thought and religion.

Born in Sialkot in the Punjab in 1878, Iqbal received his early education in Sialkot and Lahore. In 1905 he went to England and Germany, where he pursued his philosophical studies; he returned to India three years later to practice law. As Wilfrid C. Smith has put it, three things impressed him most about Europe: the vitality and dynamism of European life, the immense possibilities open to man, and the dehumanizing influence that capitalist society had on the European soul.³⁵⁴ The last circumstance strengthened his faith in the superiority of Islam as a moral and spiritual ideal, and he consequently dedicated himself to the defense and development of this ideal. The six lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam that he delivered in Madras in 1928-1929 were his major contribution to the task of reawakening his coreligionists in India and to the rethinking of Islam in modern, dynamic categories, in India and to the rethinking of Islam in modern, dynamic categories, derived primarily from nineteenth-and twentieth-century European thought.

³⁵⁴ Smith, *Modern Islam in India*, p. 102.

Iqbal's concept of religion is that of a complex, partly rational, partly ethical, and partly spiritual experience. Religion, he writes, "is neither mere thought nor mere feeling, nor mere action; it is an expression of the whole man."³⁵⁵ Hence it is not in opposition to Philosophy, but is rather an important feature of that total experience of reality upon which philosophy must reflect. This is clearly borne out by the central position which the Koran assigns to knowledge and reflection. Historically, it was the Ash'arite theologians who exploited to the full the dialectical processes of Greek thought in the defense and the definition of orthodoxy.³⁵⁶ The Mu'tazilah and Ibn Rushd went too far in their reliance on reason, and consequently they failed to recognize that in the domain of scientific and religious knowledge disassociation from "concrete experience" is a fatal error. Al-Ghazali, on the other hand, jeopardized the structure of religion by basing it upon the precarious foundation of philosophic skepticism, rooted in the contention that finite thought cannot apprehend the Infinite.

If thought, so narrowly conceived, is unable to apprehend the Infinite, it is because (1) it mistakes the nature of this Infinite as an immanent reality of whose several manifestations the multitude of finite concepts are no more than particular moments or phases, and (2) it misconceives the dynamic character of thought as it unfolds itself in time through a "series of definite specifications," whose embodiment is designated by the Koran as the "Preserved Tablet."

The concept of the concrete world embodied in the Koran is essentially one of a created reality in which the actual and the ideal merge and intertwine and which exhibits a distinct rational pattern. But it is not, for that reason, a "block

³⁵⁵ The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 2.

³⁵⁶ Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 4 f.

universe" or finished product, which God has completed, but rather a universe that continually realizes itself across the vast expanses of space and time. Man, as the most dynamic force in this universe, is the principal agent, or coworker with God, in the process of realizing the infinite potentialities of reality.³⁵⁷

It is in religions experience that man apprehends the complex aspect of this dynamic reality which is in the process of continual unfolding. This experience has an outward or empirical character as well as an inward or mystical one. The test of its genuineness is not exclusively pragmatic; it is philosophical or speculative as well, since such an experience is not without cognitive content. After criticizing the three traditional arguments for the existence of God, either on the grounds that they demonstrate the existence of a Being who though supposedly infinite is really finite, or on the grounds that they presuppose an unbridgeable gulf between being and thought which renders the process of proof entirely futile, Iqbal asserts the unity of thought and being; and upon this as a premise he proceeds to demonstrate the existence of God. "The clue to his demonstration is provided by the koranic conception of God as the First and the Last, the Visible and the Invisible,"³⁵⁸ But instead of exploiting this clue directly, Iqbal follows a circuitous philosophical path leading through Berkeley to Whitehead, Russell, Einstein, Bergson. What all those philosophers deny, according to him, is the "hypothesis of pure materiality" rendered untenable by recent developments in relativity physics and the metaphysical concepts of process and creative evolution.

None of those concepts, however, is accepted by Iqbal without reservation. Thus the creative evolution of Bergson is

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p. II.

³⁵⁸ The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 30.

open to the charge that it rejects teleology, which it mistakenly identifies with rigid determinism. Teleology, however, need not be "conceived as closed. In the Koran, for instance, the universe is conceived as being liable to continuous development, but the pattern of this development is not fixed or static. "To my mind," he writes, "nothing is more alien to the Quranic outlook than the idea that the universe is the temporal working out of a preconceived plan."³⁵⁹ Bergson's concept of pure duration gives us, however, a "direct revelation of the ultimate nature of Reality" as a spiritual principle or ego continually realizing itself, not in serial time, but in the in-word movement of dynamic growth or duration. The scene upon which the creative drama of God's boundless self-Manifestation, or the uniform pattern of behavior appropriate to him as Absolute Ego, is enacted, is nature. Hence "nature is to the Divine Self what character is to the human self."³⁶⁰ Not only Bergson, but Goethe also, has given expression to the same dynamic concept- of the unceasing realization of God's creative possibilities.

Apart from modern scientific and philosophical theories, Iqbal finds parallels for this dynamic concept of God as Creative Will or the Ash'arite. the world is not a fixed system of substantial entities, similar to Aristotle's, but rather a stream of continually created atoms, conjoined to a stream of positive or negative accidents upon which the nature of created entities in the world depends.³⁶¹

To insure its conformity with the spirit of Islam, Iqbal reinterprets the atomism of the Ash'arites in terms of a

³⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

³⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 66 f.; cf. supra, pp. 242 f.

"monadology" or spiritual pluralism, in which every particle or element of reality is spiritual, i.e., an ego or a self. The higher the selfhood or consciousness, the greater the reality of the entity in question and the closer it is to God. The Ash'arite concept of the self (ai-najs) as an accident is rejected as inadequate, and in its stead is upheld the concept of a spiritual ego as a simple, indivisible, and immutable soul substance, serving as the center of man's mental states or emotions. The chief exponent of this view in Islam, according to him, is al-Ghazali. In this view the artificial dualism of soul and body is overcome and the finite ego is shown to be an aspect of an Ultimate Ego immanent in nature and referred to by the Koran as the First and the Last, the Visible and the Invisible."³⁶² The great mystics, al-Hallaj, al-Bastami, and Rumi, gave graphic expression to this truth in their extravagant utterances identifying their finite egos with the Infinite Ego."³⁶³

In Iqbal's opinion, Muslim thought had, in its reaction against Greek philosophy, reasserted the koranic sense of the concreteness of reality, both in its empirical and spiritual aspects. In this sense, the birth of Islam marks the birth of the "inductive intellect, which made possible the rise of a scientific culture of the modern type. The reactions of numerous theologians, such as Ibn Hazm and Ibn Taymiyah, against Aristotelian logic set the stage for the rise of the inductive logic of J.S. Mill and the empiricism of modern scientific thought. Roger Bacon is generally credited by European historians with the interaction of the new spirit of scientific inquiry, but "where did Roger Bacon receive his scientific training?" Iqbal asks. "in the Muslim universities of Spain," he hastens to reply.³⁶⁴ This proves conclusively,

³⁶² The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 67, 95 f.

³⁶³ Ibid., p.; 104; cf. supra, p. 272.

according to him, that the contention that Greek philosophy determined the character of Muslim culture is entirely unfounded. For, whereas Greek thought was primarily interested in abstractions, Muslim thought turns primarily on the concrete; and, whereas the ideal of Greek thought was proportion, that of Muslim culture in its speculative and mystical aspects was the possession and enjoyment of the Infinite.³⁶⁵

We will not dwell much longer on Iqbal's general characterization of Muslim culture and the Islamic concept of reality. Very often he reads into classic Islamic themes purely Hegelian or Bergsonian concepts. The relationship between such concepts and the koranic verses cited in their support is often very tenuous. Like other liberal interpreters of the Koran, particularly in India, the chief fault of his exegetical method lies in its disregard for the contextual character of Koranic revelation, of what the commentators normally refer to as *asbab al-nuzul*, the historical circumstances in which the revelation was made.

Be this as it may, the reader of Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is overwhelmed with the vastness of his learning and the scope of his metaphysical and religious speculation. His versatility and eclecticism, however, are often exasperating. For one thing, he often rambles from one theme to another and provides only the most tenuous links. For another, he frequently invokes the authority of illustrious philosophers and scientists in support of his own major themes, only to turn on them later and show their inadequacy or incoherence. Very often the multiplication of authorities, ancient or modern, Western or Islamic, is done at such a pace that the reader is left breathless. In the scope of six pages, for instance, the following names are cited: Berkeley, Whitehead,

³⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 123. He quotes as his authority Briffault, *The Making of Humanity*.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

Einstein, Russell, Zeno, Newton, al-Ash'ari, Ibn Hazm, Bergson, Cantor, and Ouspensky - to mention only the principal figures or authorities.³⁶⁶

Despite these shortcomings, it cannot be denied that Iqbal has made a more impressive and conscientious attempt than any other twentieth-century thinker to rethink the basic problems of Islam in modern categories. It need not surprise us that in the process he tended to lose sight of the premises of this rethinking and has unwittingly turned over to a strange assortment of modern philosophers and scientists, from Berkeley to Einstein, the task of interpreting the Koran. Almost all Islamic modernists and liberals have committed the unforgivable sin of ignoring and underrating the historical dimension of Islam. Very often in their appeal to the authority of the Loran in support of theological or metaphysical claims of which the ancients never dreamed, they quite naturally draw on the hidden meaning of Koranic passages. The sufis, the Isma' ilis, and many others were particularly skilled at this art, but traditional Islam has always frowned upon this unorthodox procedure. Today this art can be practiced in the mane of rationalism or progress only in

³⁶⁶ The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, pp. 31-37. Dr. Javid Iqbal has also expressed a similar opinion about the Reconstruction.

*Reconstruction is a difficult book. It carries more than 150 references to the statements of philosopher, scientists, scholars-and jurists of the East and the West, both modern and ancient. Iqbal expects from his readers that they should be acquainted with the life, times and thoughts to these personalities of which some are known while others are not. Moreover his style, in his Reconstruction, is extremely complicated. Several issues are often initiated during a single discussion or a different problem is broached while in the tracks of the earlier discussion to which he returns after expressing his views on the newly inaugurated issue. New terminology is employed to elucidate certain ideas and his arraignment of words in these terms creates difficulties in their understanding. At times his arguments are incomprehensible in English and its meanings do not become clear even after repeated attempts.

See Javid Iqbal, Zinda Rud, Lahore, 1987, Vol. III, p. 370.

moderation; otherwise it threatens to destroy the very foundations of the cult and replace it with the fantasies of dreamers or visionaries.

Finally, by wedding the Islamic or Koranic view of man and the world to the current phase of scientific development, as Iqbal particularly has done, the modernists make their second most dangerous error, since they stake the religious truth of Islam on the doubtful truth of a scientific phase. And if there is anything the history of scientific discovery teaches us, it is the ephemeral character of such scientific phases, whether associated with the venerable names of Aristotle or Ptolemy or modern pioneers such as Newton, Eddington, or Einstein.

Book Review